The Charity Boy

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Summary: Libra attends Ylisstol Private on a scholarship from the church and is resigned to his future as a clergyman. At seventeen his life has been lonely, simple and unnoticed by his schoolmates. Robin, a refugee from the brutal and enigmatic Grimleal cult, proves a welcome if strange relief. Together they struggle through their respective pasts and to a future of their own design. ModAU

Chapter 1: First Words Matter

I am still alive!

I did a Thing to my computer, a Very Silly Thing, and I broke it for a good two months. It was very tragic. Especially whenever I had to explain to people why it wasn't working. Turns out trying to optimise your computer while also on strong pain medication is a recipe for disaster. Disaster only had two ingredients and I wielded both.

Anyway, past the boring stuff. I've been working on this one for a while. I wrote out the first five thousand words then immediately discarded that and started again. Progress! I've had some requests for stories, which I will also be working on. Thus far, I have this one planned for multiple chapters.

Here's to praying my writing skills have not gone to seed during The Great OS Black Out of '15.

Unbeta'd, as per usual. Please point out any grave mistakes.

"All alone, little Libra?"

Libra froze just in front of the turnstile, his card poised over the electronic reader. One more step and he would have tapped his way to salvation.

He'd managed to avoid his tormentors for the duration of the fieldtrip, which was a miracle in of itself. Two museums and a historical park didn't provide the best hiding places, but he found if he kept a close orbit around Chrom and his pack of friends the others would keep their distance.

Perhaps that was why they had managed to creep up on him now – lulled into a false sense of security, Libra had hurried on ahead of his classmates in the hope of catching an earlier train back to Central and then on to Naga's Rest. It would have simplified his travel home, but so would keeping a step behind Chrom, or even Sully.

They had invited him out after school again, off to the cafes, game stores and bookshops they were so fond of frequenting. But Libra was acutely aware of his perpetually empty pockets and always made his excuses. Despite this, he wished fervently he had taken them up on their offer this time. Better to be the tragically poor kid than the tragically pummelled kid.

Libra was shaken from his thoughts by a huge, meaty hand clamping down on his shoulder – the touch made his skin shiver and slump, his muscles turned to water by the proximity of another person. They knew he hated being touched, hated any sort of contact, which was part of the reason why they insisted on their rough shoulder pats and punches. Libra tried to be generous, tried to remind himself they truly had no idea how much the slightest brush shook him to his core and left some deep, weak part of him quivering uncontrollably.

Or maybe they did know. Libra cursed his history teacher's bright idea to come out to Crossroad Garden.

"Oi, drag queen." Libra was shaken hard enough to nearly dislodge his backpack; through his long fringe he caught a glimpse of his primary bully. Garrick was an idiot, but that was as far as he went on his own. Libra could tolerate him on even his worst day. It was the elder brother leering over his shoulder which made him break out in a cold sweat. Roddick goaded his dim-witted younger brother every chance he got, and Garrick was so keen to impress his sibling he often went overboard. Libra had to hide more than one black eye and destroyed textbook from the sisters at the church orphanage.

"Gone deaf, little lady?" Garrick crowed, earning himself an approving snigger from his brother. Garrick's fingers dug into his back, Libra's shoulder felt like an overripe plum where the bigger boy had touched him and the gate was so achingly close. It was nearly three o'clock, weren't they creating a major obstruction to the flow of foot traffic? Looking around, Libra realised most of those around him were students, and they broke and flowed around the group like water. They knew trouble when they saw it.

Libra resigned himself to tender mercies, unable to stop a sigh escaping from his lips. He had been so close…

"Libra, come join us!" Chrom, past the faregate with his friends and waving madly at him. Sully, Frederick, and Vaike beckoned him over as well, though he saw Sully's eyes subtly narrow when they flickered over to Garrick and his crew.

Garrick's hand snatched away from his shoulder as though it suddenly grew a set of teeth. Libra acted purely on instinct then, though it was the one geared solely towards short term survival – his elbow jerked back violently and nailed Garrick in the stomach, driving the air from his lungs with a surprisingly delicate 'whumf', simultaneously slamming his card

down on the reader.

That ding of approval was the sweetest sound he'd heard all day. Garrick staggered backwards right into his brother, whose wild flailing brought down their two other cronies. Libra sprinted through the open barrier, his hair flying free of his habitual braid with his turn of speed. He heard Garrick bellow with rage but Libra didn't bother to even turn his head - any distraction would slow him down, and while he could outrun Garrick, his brother could easily outpace him.

Chrom began to move forward, gaze focused over Libra's head and his smile rapidly falling into a hard grimace. Libra didn't need to look to know that Garrick had cleared the turnstile.

Libra didn't stop for Chrom – he was too far gone, too lost in adrenalin to seek shelter with them. He took a hard left six feet from the group and into the mouth of a wide corridor – stairs lead alternatively up and down to their respective platforms, and the numbers whipped past in a blur.

His teachers wanted him to try out for track. Libra wanted to find his train and go home or, as a back-up plan, out of this city.

In his haste Libra almost ran past his platform; taking the stairs three at a time to platform 25 and 26, Libra was viscerally aware of the pounding footsteps behind him, and it was this sickening terror of being caught that drove him into the packed platform and the thick swarm of teenagers. Several people screamed, some playfully and others in annoyance, but Libra ignored them all. There was a train due to depart; he had burst out at the last carriage, a rickety old thing barely still qualified to carry passengers.

It was perfect, and Libra began to real struggle towards the still open doors.

"Hey – Libra, wait up!" Panicked, Libra squeezed through the press of high school students, ignoring their gasps and protests. He was still two feet from the door and boxed in by tittering, bewildered teenagers when the shrill blast of a whistle cut through the air – his salvation was seconds from being out of his grasp.

Libra felt a hand land deliberately on his shoulder, and the burst of adrenalin which followed was enough to propel him out of the crush, through the narrowing gap and onto the train's sticky floor. He heard his name called out once again, the voice surprised and resonantly deep, before the elderly doors finally shuddered shut.

Wincing, Libra rolled over, trying to ignore the way his trousers griped the unclean floor. Through scratched, spray painted glass Chrom was frantically trying to get his attention, one finger jabbing madly at a point above Libra's head. Confused, Libra followed his gaze, craning his neck until his gaze landed on the only thing Chrom could have been pointing at.

His heart turned cold, and sank into his stomach. The train jerked, squeaking along ancient tracks.

The screen above the opposite door scrolled through the scheduled stops. Threnody – Footrot - Agnetha Village – Berrymarket – Haywood - West Haywood – Hourglass – West Hourglass –

The bright orange block letters continued sliding, sealing Libra's apparent fate. He was already too far west for his comfort – this train wouldn't take him home as he so desperately hoped. Only further west, closer to the outskirts of the city and to the terrible wild places beyond.

He needed the modern trains on platform 25, and in his haste he'd boarded the first train in sight.

"Libra!" Libra jerked his head back to the door – the train had started to gather speed but Chrom was valiantly running alongside it, the sea of people in front parting obediently to clear his path. "Libra, just get a train back to Central!" Fear contorted the boy's face briefly, and Chrom was abruptly reminded of Libra's encounter with his daily tormentor's. "We'll be there to pick you up, okay? We'll meet you on the platform at Central, get off at – "

Chrom disappeared midsentence, blurred crowds and blue hair replaced by fluorescent lights and deep shadows as they passed into the tunnel.

His heart had thawed, but now it pounded sickly in his chest. Get off where? At Threnody? Haywood was the more likely spot in his mind as it was the last major hub, but it was also notorious for the influx of students from Northroad Public School – his stomach churned at the thought.

Realising he was still sprawled out on the floor – *idiot* – Libra shakily pulled himself up, hanging onto pole for support. He took a moment to gather himself and look around. Despite the crowd on the platform this particular carriage was sparsely populated. Libra figured it was the state of the carriage itself which drove people away – it had been tacked on like an afterthought to the back of the sleek new machine which was now making good speed down the tracks. Minimal

effort had gone into repairing the gashes in the tacky, cold vinyl seats; cold overhead lights flickered whenever the train took a corner, and the only bright colours came from the graffiti liberally coating the walls. The council had been trying to phase out these old beasts from active duty but a few of them still survived.

Libra turned his attention to the few occupants. A few seats away, a young office worker had tucked herself up against the window, angled so she wouldn't accidentally catch anyone's eye. For extra measure, she had half-curled herself around her phone, fingers dancing across the screen with a look of utmost concentration on her blue-lit face.

A preschool kid with his mother sat a few more seats down, scribbling in his colouring book with the solemnity of The Exalt signing a national decree. His mother, like the office worker, was preoccupied with her phone, occasionally providing a half-distracted mumble of approval when her child prompted her to look at his drawing.

Just beyond them, a girl almost drowning in a huge black sweater held her phone up to her face. Her eyes didn't even flicker, so she clearly wasn't interested in whatever was displayed on the screen. A young boy sat slightly behind her - he was handsome, in a slightly girlish way, and Libra felt a tired old curl of jealousy when he noted that even with his slightly feminine looks there was no way this guy would be outright mistaken for a girl. The boy, oblivious to his observer, pushed an errant lock of hair from his face and kept scrolling through his phone. The girl's phone twitched in response to the movement, and Libra surmised she was a silent admirer.

The last occupant was another girl, and she had been watching him the entire time.

Libra ducked his head instinctively – it was a bad time for it. The train took a sudden turn – unused to the route and unable to adjust, Libra fell heavily against the metal edge of a seat. Pain exploded in his hip, and a gasp of pain burst forth from his lips before he could stop it. For a few agonising seconds he was unable to regain his balance, the curve of the train still throwing him off, but after a few seconds he was able to clamber up.

All eyes were now on him, apart from the sweater girl, who obviously knew an opportunity when she saw one. Libra flushed crimson and wished he could sink through the floor. Maybe the train would be kind enough to finish him off.

His eyes were drawn back to the girl, as though his brain was unsatisfied with the disruption of his study. Now it seemed determined in drink in all the details. She was pretty, in a razor sharp kind of way – like how a broken window was pretty, all jagged edges and refracting light. She was around his age and wore no school uniform, instead wearing an embroidered blouse and yellow knee-length skirt, a peach-coloured ribbon catching up her white hair. Even to Libra, who would vehemently deny behaviour remotely considered feminine, knew it was entirely inappropriate for her.

Her face was – strange. Not deformed or ugly, just perfectly poised in a way that was almost alien. Slightly foreign, and those white locks marked her as having Plegian blood, that was clear as anything. Her eyes weren't cruel, or mocking, they were just…shuttered. They gave no hint to the person inside, as surely as a stone door sealed off a tomb.

One fine white brow rose in challenge to his stare, and once again Libra felt his cheeks heat. The girl smiled ever so slightly, a mere curving of her lips – though it was neither friendly nor warm, it was genuine.

Libra couldn't help but offer his own tiny, shy flutter of a smile in return.

He settled back into his own seat, slightly more relaxed with no real cause to name. The rest of the occupants had already returned to their devices, and a smooth female voice was already announcing the next stop through crackly speakers.

Libra peeped out the window when the train pulled into Threnody. It was a surprisingly small platform for a place to close to a sought-after university, and throngs of students were already pouring into the prettier carriages. Their chatter was bright, happy, and it made Libra ache deep inside his chest. Chrom and his friends did their best, and the times he could spend with the group were cherished as the rare gems they were, but he still orbited them distantly. They couldn't protect him from the isolation of their classmates, and Libra almost didn't want them to. As much as he longed for a friend, knowing they would be just as much a pariah as he was enough to keep him wilfully alone.

The office worker disembarked the train, her nose still buried in her online life. Libra watched her go, and wondered briefly at her life – who was she talking to? What did she do, when she got off the train? Was she going home, to a club, to a class, to meet a boyfriend? *Or girlfriend*, Libra reminded himself a little guiltily. What drove her to get up every day? Did she have goals she still worked towards, or had they slipped away with the passing months until her life had become paying the bills and watching late night television?

Libra shuddered at the idea.

He briefly considered hopping off and trying to locate his next train, but a burst of boisterous laughter had him shrinking

back. The Northroad students had been let loose by the sound of things, and Libra's imagination happily provided a scene of terror on his mental stage. He had never personally had a run in with the students, but the stories had made their rounds. Northroad kids target students from a different private school each month for their money, to keep them in rotation. Northroad kids brawled on Monday to establish the pecking order of that week. Northroad kids burned down an apartment building last summer using only a tube of papaw ointment and some copper wire.

Libra was a little doubtful about that last one, but he decided to play it safe and avoid becoming the latest in a long string of anecdotes. He shrank back into his seat.

As they pulled away from Threnody, Libra was startled by a sudden, violent vibration in his jacket pocket. Clumsily fumbling for the source, Libra pulled out his ancient phone. Well, ancient by phone standards, which meant it was approximately six years old and of the old fliptop style. Only a few people had his number, and one of them was –

Chrom's name was splashed across its cracked screen; dumbfounded, Libra opened the message.

:libra we will meet you at central. get a train at threnody or haywood and it will take you straight to platform thirteen. be careful and watch your batch.

Libra blinked – before he had time to speculate, another message popped up.

*:*back. damn autocorrect.*

The train departed soon enough, though no one new joined their carriage. Footrot swarmed with affluent housewives and nannies escorting their charges home. The teenage boy swaggered off, but the sweater girl made no move to follow him. Strange.

The absent mother and her son alighted at Agnetha Village – they almost missed their stop, and the mother was suddenly stuck with the frantic job of cleaning up her son's scattered crayons. Libra took pity on them after a moment and helped to collect the items, earning himself a vacant smile and a comment on 'what a kind young lady' he was. Libra wished he were the type of person who slapped other people, just so he could deal what he felt was very much deserved.

At Berrymarket the sweater girl slinked off the train, scowling darkly and occasionally glancing over her shoulder. Libra surreptitiously followed her gaze – the white haired girl gave him a cheery wave that was nonetheless predatory, and returned to the task of untangling her earphones.

Libra had a preternatural ability to detect when he was about to be in big trouble. In this case, it was the asthmatic hiss of doors opening – someone was crossing between carriages. Not unusual, but Libra doubted they were coming to a shoddy, almost empty car for hymn study.

He heard them before he saw them, and the mental picture painted was pretty accurate to what swaggered down the steps; they were lean, wearing the slightly rumpled uniform of Northroad Public School, and carried themselves with the kind of self-assured cockiness of teenagers who believed themselves to be the roughest thing on the train, if not the city.

Libra tried to slide down a little further into his seat. This just served to catch the attention of the nearest boy – Libra averted his eyes a second too late to miss the light, cold twitch of a smile. He'd done his best to stuff his red hair under a faded cap, a few stray spikes falling across his eyes.

"Hey. Miss. Why're you wearin' a boy's uniform?" He followed this with a snigger, and his friends gradually gathered around him to observe the fun.

Just once, he'd like to be called something other than a girl. He felt like a laboratory specimen under their scrutiny.

"Hey. Hey miss." Cheeks burning again, Libra ignored their prompts. The boys fidgeted and giggled again, their apparent leader taking a mincing step forward and back. He was testing the waters, seeing how much he could get away with before committing to the attack.

"Hey, miss…where you goin'?" once again, Libra didn't answer. The boy changed tack. "Miss, you got any spare change? I need to catch the bus…when I geddoff the train." Libra was disappointed the boy was not immediately struck down for the scope of that lie. The boy didn't even try to hide it. "Ol!" The boy leaned down close, so close his breath puffed into Libra's ear and sent his skin crawling. "You a *lesbian*? Is that why you're dressed as a boy?"

"I have nothing to offer you!" Damn it! Could his voice have been any squeakier? Libra cleared his throat and mustered up a glare. "I don't have any change, and I'm – I'm not – "

"Not a dyke?" the boy interrupted, grinning like a mad moon now. "Only dykes dress like boys. It's, you know, like, the dictionary definition of a dyke."

"I am – I am a boy," Libra said hoarsely, his throat constricting with unshed tears. He hated himself when he acted like this. He could be brave for the younger orphans, be brave for the younger students and even for his classmates – but be brave for himself?

If he started that, when would it stop?

The boy laughed, high and nasty, and his friends joined in a second later. "You're joking? A boy?" He nudged one of his friends. "You sure? Got all the, y'know, *bits*?" It wasn't funny, or clever, or even particularly mean, but Libra reddened anyway and ducked his head.

"We should check to make sure," one of the boys suggested, and that almost drive Libra over the edge. The press of their eyes was bad enough, but the idea of them grabbing his shirt, tearing at it until the buttons burst and pinching, scratching, hitting his skin…white sparks exploded behind Libra's eyes, his breath coming in short, sharp snatches.

Libra drew his legs up to his chest, preparing to kick out at them, to run for the door. Even if the train was nowhere close to stopping, maybe he could keep working through the carriages long enough for the doors to open…

"There you are; I was looking all over for you," a silky, accented voice interrupted. As one, their heads turned to gawp at the white haired girl. Even in her saccharinely sweet clothes, the girl gave the impression of being undeniably dangerous. It was like watching a Great White Shark play fetch. Something was going to go horribly wrong for someone in the near future, and there would probably be limbs all over the place.

She idly swung her tangle-free earphones from one hand, the other resting on her hip. "I didn't even realise you'd gotten on the train," she continued on, the cord swinging faster into a whirring white blur. "How awful it would have been if I had missed you."

"What the hell are you – argh!" The boy barely avoided her first lash with her earphones, and the upswing had her playfully snapping them inches from his face.

"This could be the fourth pair of earbuds I'll waste on your lot this week," the girl said offhandedly, wrapping them deftly around her palm, the very ends dangling freely by her thumb. "If I need to break this pair…I'll be all out of earphones, so I'll have to switch to heavier stuff."

Libra had never seen such a change – all their anger and bewilderment slipped off their faces, to be replaced with a certain expectant dread.

"You're – "

"*Yup*. This is my carriage, go and find another." Her hard look softened. "Look, I don't actually want to fight you. Just go, the kid doesn't want you here."

Cap Boy shouldered his way forward; none of his friends seemed eager to hold him back. "You can't *make* us, this is *our* train in our goddamn city, Plegian." Though he spat the last word, the girl didn't react the way he evidently hoped, just shifted her weight and jerked her head towards the door. Only Libra saw the way her knuckles whitened around the earphones.

A muscle pulsed in her cheek but she still endeavoured to speak calmly. "There are plenty of other carriages. You know I mean business – let's settle this like reasonable people." This was clearly the very last way she wanted to settle.

Cap Boy grinned widely and slithered forward slightly. "That's weird, I 'fort you'd be up for a fight. Dregs love a bit of Ylissean blood."

The earphones clattered against the window and the girl lunged forward like a panther, so suddenly Cap Boy could only fall backwards, yelping. He stumbled clumsily into his pack of cronies, the girl's fist just missing his face – Libra realised the only reason it hadn't connected was because someone had grabbed her wrist at the last second and was hanging on for dear life.

He was dismayed when he realised that someone was him.

Libra looked up into the girl's face and tried to separate the emotions he saw there. Rage, yes, seething and white-hot; frustration; disgust…sorrow. Something even deeper lurked, wizened and coiled around her soul.

Libra blinked and pulled back, releasing her arms when his fingers began the familiar, unpleasant tingle of registering human contact. The girl met his eyes, dark brown to jade green.

It was unnerving having someone's complete attention. Libra shrank back, dropping his gaze and breaking their electric connection.

Cap Boy chose that moment to try and swing himself forward, and the girl's other arm, the one not closest to Libra, lashed out like it had a mind of its own. Libra saw the rage cloud her features again.

She caught a handful of Cap Boy's shirt, pulling him in and off balance until he was inches from her tight, furious face. He had evidently struck a chord before - though for what reason Libra couldn't fathom. He had heard women be called worse things than a 'dreg'.

"Kol khara, runt" she drawled icily, wringing out the vowels. "I hear that again from your mouth and I swear I'll see to it you go through the rest of your life screaming when you see string." She gave him a hard, brutal shake, hard enough to make his teeth audibly clack together, then shoved him back to his friends.

Cap Boy's eyes burned fiercely, but his will had evidently been broken. Libra kept his eyes firmly fixed on his hands, but he could feel the rage streaming off her. The pack reluctantly backed away, occasionally throwing a glance back at Libra and the girl as they edged towards the door.

As soon at the interconnecting door clanked shut Libra released a breath he didn't realise he had been holding. Half-expecting to be the new target of the girl's apparent psychopathy, he risked a look up at her – she was watching him with mingled curiousity and suspicion.

Libra hoped she would return to her seat; she had seemed harmless before but her over-the-top reaction to such a paltry insult had him doubting she was the safer one to be with.

"Are…you okay?" she asked eventually, her anger once again evaporating in an instant. "You're kinda pale."

"I'm…always pale," Libra answered numbly. "It's…I'm pale."

She smiled; the same finely crafted smile of general goodwill and no personal interest. Libra had the strangest sense of déjà vu. "Oh, right. Sorry. I suppose that should have been obvious." There was a slight barb on the end which Libra chose to ignore.

To his mild apprehension, she settled across from him, crossing her legs daintily. "What's your stop?" she asked eventually, her fingers neatly laced and resting in her lap.

"Ummm…Haywood, I suppose," Libra answered after a moment. What was the harm in letting her know.

Her brow crinkled. "Haywood?"

"Uh, yes."

"…The Haywood we just left?"

"*What*?"

Libra was pressed against the window in a heartbeat; she was right. The train was just clearing the platform at that second, his view replaced with old fences and the grubby backend of restaurants. He hadn't even noticed when they pulled into the station.

"Oh gods," he whispered, feeling slightly sick. How was he to get back? Chrom had said Threnody or Haywood was just best chance at getting a train back to Central. More trains meant more chance of being cornered by another pack of money-poor, muscle-rich boys, and Chrom wouldn't wait forever…

"You needed to be off at Haywood?" the girl asked, idly tapping her foot. "I'm getting off at West Haywood. You stick with me, I'll get you where you want to go." A pause. "Where *do* you want to go."

"Home would be a good start." Libra returned mechanically to his seat, slouching down again. He didn't elaborate further.

"My powers are numerous, but they don't include telepathy," she quipped; Libra peeked out from behind his curtain of hair. "West Haywood's trains are rubbish but their buses will get you anywhere. Worst comes, you get a taxi."

"I couldn't afford a taxi," Libra answered tiredly, beginning to scrape his hair back from his face. "I live at the convent in Central, they don't give travel allowance."

The girl looked shocked. "But…you're a private schoolboy!"

Libra shrugged; he didn't feel like explaining it right now. He received a tiny allowance at the beginning of each week, but he was expected to donate half that amount back to the church. A tiny, unpleasant voice in the back of Libra's head suggested it was a win-win situation for the Church.

Libra began to fumble for a spare hairband – the school was quite strict when it came to the appearance of their students, and Libra was really only permitted to keep the length in his hair because of his link to the church. His quest for a hairtie ended when a slender gold tie, loop around alabaster fingers, was shoved under his nose. He hesitated to take it, reaching out with one hand while the other kept his harm firmly pulled back. The girl regarded him a little impatiently.

"Just take it, stranger," she muttered. "I've got others, you'd be doing me a favour." Libra accepted it warily, careful to avoid brushing her skin, and began the process of braiding his hair into submission. He didn't speak, keeping his eyes firmly on his lap; she didn't speak, but he could feel her eyes boring into head.

"I'm Libra," he offered reluctantly once the task was complete, tossing his finished braid over his shoulder; the girl dithered with her reply, like she was trying out different answers in her head.

"R-Robin," she finally answered. The girl – Robin – gave her polite, empty smile again and shifted against the uncomfortable seats. "You…said you live at the convent near the catherdral. Do your parent's work there or are you training to be a priest?"

Libra coloured. Her valiant efforts at making conversation were among the worst questions she could ask. "I am training to be a priest, it's part of living at the convent. And…and the orphanage is at the convent."

Robin's face lost a little bit of colour, and her mouth formed a perfect 'o'. "Ah, I'm sorry, that was…you lost your parents. I'm sorry to hear that."

Libra shrugged, swallowing hard against the bile threatening to rise in his throat. "I'm not."

The way she looked at him, Libra was certain she knew exactly how untruthful that was, but she thankfully didn't press. "I have a mother," she offered. Libra's smile was tight, a mere acknowledgement of her words - he wished he could think of a way to politely extricate himself from this conversation and carriage.

Robin appeared to mull something over, then came to a decision. Her fist smack down decisively onto her open palm.

"You should share her with me."

Libra's jaw dropped. She was absolutely sincere, as far as he could tell. And she looked rather pleased with herself, as though she found this an excellent conclusion. Part of him was insulted; did she really think her own mother could replace his parents, as raw and painful as his last memories were of them? He sometimes saw the younger children being adopted out – by the time he came to the orphanage no one would even consider taking him in. Libra always watched them go, and as much as he craved to be one of those lucky few, he desired even more for his true parents would return for him.

Another part wondered if this was another facet of her insanity. Yet another suggested it was a Plegian thing, and therefore a little immoral and potentially dangerous.

But most of him was consumed by the laughter, bubbling up like a freshwater stream from some hidden part within him. A part he'd long since secretly thought was barren rock. It swelled up from his throat, sloshed over into his mouth and finally exploded out in one great gush of laughter. He covered his eyes with one hand and laughed and laughed, tears beading at the corner of his eyes and his stomach starting to knot.

He heard Robin huff, though she didn't sound really upset or annoyed. "Ah, you may laugh at my offer now, but wait till you meet my mother," she admonished. "You won't be cackling then." He accent got a little thicker, but it made her sound warm and amused.

After a few more minutes his laughter faded into the occasional chortle, and he wiped his eyes as best he could. There were a few too many tears on his cheeks for a laughing fit.

"We'll be at West Haywood shortly," Robin said, slowly putting away her things. "I'll help you along from there."

Libra coughed slightly and pulled his backpack onto his lap. "Why are you helping me?"

Robin shrugged. "You helped me. Stopping me from beating on those boys back there. I would have regretted it later if I'd hurt them – I owe you for stopping me." If Robin saw the flash of disappointment on his face she gave no sign.

She stared at him for a moment, the train beginning its tell-tale screech into the station. "Hey, Libra…" Libra waited patiently for her to finished, but she just jumped to her feet and shouldered her bag. She walked off without another word, and he hurried to catch up with her.

She stopped at the still-closed doors, the trains still moving ever so slightly. Libra stepped in beside her, watching her curiously from the corner of his eye. What could she have wanted? Her shuttered look had returned, but her mask was not quite so complete – Robin gnawed ever so slightly on her lower lip.

It was strangely…it was *weirdly* – Libra felt light-headed.

The doors creaked open, and they stepped out. West Haywood was an open station, just a couple of long boarding platforms with a few seats and shelters spaced along the length. Surprisingly, the entire station was hemmed in with a single line of lush, reaching trees. They almost completely concealed the gables of houses on the other side, and the sounds of the outside world was pleasantly muffled.

Libra drank it in. It was pleasant; the inner city had manicured parks, tended estates and beautiful greenhouses, but it didn't have any wild beauty. No secret nooks, no hidden gardens, no mysterious rivers or ethereal glades. He sometimes imagined what it would be like, if it were safe for the average citizen to venture beyond the city borders.

He realised Robin was simply standing next to him, and the train was pulling away. "Libra," she said again suddenly. "Why did you stop me?"

Libra blinked rapidly, turning to look her right in the eye. He found this unnerved people most of the time, but Robin matched his gaze. "What do you mean? Those boys back there?"

"Yeah." Robin rolled a piece of gravel underfoot, back and forth. "They would have hurt you."

"They could have," Libra agreed.

"And they were *rude*," Robin muttered, staring hard at her feet. "So…so…" Her face creased, just for a moment, and Libra stepped forward. Stepped back. Forward again, his hands raised in front of him in a half-placating, half-defensive gesture. He wanted to offer comfort, but it would involve touching…

"I don't…" here he struggled, but she looked up at him again. "I don't…think they should have been hurt. They didn't really deserve it. Being stupid, and ignorant, and lashing out at people is something they do. I'd rather not be like them. I may be hurt, I might be humiliated but I'm not…not like them. I think it's an important decision to make."

Robin was looking at him strangely. Like he was making an awful lot of sense, which Libra wasn't really sure was so. "Yeah, I get you…" her words were soft, almost too soft.

Libra smiled awkwardly. "I don't really want to hurt people. I figure it'll all blow over eventually so there's no point."

She looked at him a little strangely then. "How are they meant to know they're doing something wrong if you don't say anything? If you don't talk about it?"

Libra gritted his teeth against a harsher response, and tried to think of a wiser comeback. "Better than punching them," Libra mumbled crossly – it was the best he could do with her staring at him the whole time.

The spell was broken; Robin gave a snort of laughter and readjusted her bag.

"Yeah, I guess you got me there," she admitted.

She smiled again. But this time, it was real. It only happened for a second, but it was there; a tiny little thing, so faint. A fluttering of moth wings against the moon. Libra wanted to step forward, cup his hands around it and watch it beat. It wasn't something he had ever wanted to do, to anyone.

His heart skipped a beat and his palms tingled. Libra wrote it off as anxiety.

"Come get some food with me," Robin said, jerking her head towards the stairs. "Come on. There's a festival going on in West Haywood – the Chon'sin locals seem to have a celebration for everything under the sun. This time it's spring, which

I suppose is an acceptable reason."

Libra licked his lips worriedly. Chrom was waiting for him at Central; so was Garrick, in all likelihood. Mother Fyora would be expecting him back soon to do his chores; his homework; watch the little ones; practice his scriptures and his form; tell her about his day (all lies, of course); attend confession and assist in the evening service…

What he did every day.

And here was Robin, a girl he'd met not half an hour ago, who offered him a parent and a meal and treated him more like a person than anyone in the past year.

Though she was wary, acerbic, hot-tempered and, above all else, Plegian…He would much prefer to stay.

"Go on," she prompted him, grinning. "When will you ever come out to the West again?"

"Well…" Libra swallowed thickly. "Maybe when…I meet your mother, as you said. I need a chance to regret my mirth."

Robin laughed again – fully, rich and delighted. "Oh, you clever thing! This is true!" She held out her hand to him – at the other end, that tiny, true smile shimmered and trembled with promise. "You could learn a lot. So could I."

One day I will get over this pairing. But not today.

Love to hear thoughts and constructive criticism. Or flames, that's also interesting.

Chapter 2: Fumbled It

It seems my method for this story is write half a chapter and then discard it. For every story I keep another document full of the bits I've written, decided were not going to work and set them aside for potential later use. The word count on The Charity Boy's folder is huge. I could write an AU *of an AU* just based off that. But I won't because that's silly.

Chapter is unbeta'd.

That morning, Libra had rolled out of bed five minutes before his alarm. That was routine.

In the predawn light he had silently trooped down the stairs and into the practice courtyard. It was expected the children would uphold the church's traditions, and Libra took guilty pride in his skill at axe formations. That was routine.

He had showered and dressed, helped the younger children get ready, then ushered them all downstairs for breakfast. Furtively taken his medicine. That was routine.

Grace was reverential, punctuated by sniffling and fidgeting from the other orphans. The meal was fruit, porridge and toast. That was routine.

Halfway to school Libra was intercepted by Garrick and his crew. Garrick seemed to be on the more benevolent end of his very dull spectrum, so Libra was allowed to tag along behind them with only a few absent-minded taunts thrown his way. He knew he would pay for it later, but that was also routine.

During the lessons he kept his head down and made to look as though he were engrossed in his notes. His teachers believed him to be a diligent student and so rarely bothered him, which was a relief because outstanding academic practice was a sure way to draw unwanted attention.

At lunch Chrom invited him to sit at their table. Libra sat towards the end, slightly apart from Chrom's gaggle of vibrant, pretty friends. The last thing he wanted was to taint their reputations with his presence, and they rarely spared him a second glance – even so, their proximity was enough to keep away the usual tormentors so he ate his lunch in peace. This was an aspect of the routine, more welcome than Garrick's usual throw-Libra's-lunch-into-the-lake hijinks.

Their field trip had been fun. Libra sat alone, in the middle of the bus, pretending to be texting on his phone while the others chattered around him. He was getting quite good at subtle reactions, a twitching smile or widened eyes to simulate a riveting conversation with his fictional contact. Libra found the busride went quickest when he wrote witty comebacks to imaginary arguments he may hypothetically hold with Garrick or Nelson or Jamil. That was routine, probably the most pathetic part, which was saying a lot.

Even the train station was routine. It wasn't uncommon for the older students to make their own way home if a field trip concluded outside of normal school hours. Being ambushed at the train station was common and really, Libra should have guessed they would follow him there.

Libra was used to routine, paltry and lonely though it may be. He wished for marvels, but even he knew when not to push his luck.

And now he was in an unfamiliar part of Ylisstol, with a girl who was definitely bizarre and possibly a little mentally unbalanced, with a lapful of Chon'sin cuisine and the moon just beginning to rise. It was well past his usual arrival time at the orphanage; heart pounding and palms slick with sweat, Libra had sent a message to one of the sisters explaining that he had an extra lesson in art scheduled and he would be late returning to the cathedral. He didn't specify a time and the sister he messaged hadn't asked, her only response a curt affirmation.

It would soon be past a reasonable time to arrive at all; Libra was vaguely worried they would lock him out. The emotion did not have space or time to take root in the mess that was his head. It was all so strange, so new and wonderful and frightening! Libra had no idea how diverse it was outside of the primary rings and his own personal bubble of safety.

"Those dumplings have no secrets to tell, Libra," Robin drawled next to him, a good foot of space between them on the wooden park bench. Libra hadn't mentioned it and Robin made no comment, but his new acquaintance had picked up pretty quickly on how much pain Libra put into avoiding contact. "You may as well eat them before they get cold or walk away. Do you not like them?"

"Oh." Libra glanced down hurriedly at the Styrofoam carton clutched in his hands. Half a dozen dumplings still crowded the container, steaming enticingly and bathed in soy sauce. "I really like them, I just…"

"Are you hungry or super hungry?" Robin asked him. Libra didn't answer for a moment, too distracted by the novelty of walking beside someone. Most of the time, he trailed behind people. Out of sight, out of the way, out of reach. Robin insisted, non-verbally, on matching his pace and remaining side by side.

Libra realised she had been patiently repeating his name. "Oh! Um…nothing, I'm…"

"You're definitely hungry," Robin dismissed before he could excuse himself. "You're about my age, I guess. I'm always famished." Libra glanced around nervously – the stalls were all colourful, all bustling and wafting the most amazing aromas. Stir-fry beef, plump pork dumplings, braised eggplant, fluffy omelettes, steaming hot fish broth, crispy onion pancakes, hot chocolate pudding and strawberry shortcake…his mouth watering, his stomach growled loud enough for them both to hear.

"Told ya." Robin pointed to the closest stall. The tiniest old lady Libra had ever seen was cheerily selling what looked to be some form of grilled chicken. "Look, let's just get a lot of everything and find somewhere quiet to eat. Starting with that chicken; it calls to me."

Libra stepped back, already wishing he had gotten on the next train back to Haywood. The walk to the festival had taken nearly twenty minutes, Libra spending most of that time working out what to say to Chrom. He had ended up sending a quick thank you and that he was out with a friend. Chrom had been kind but dubious in his reply. Libra couldn't blame him.

Now he had no guard to meet him at the station, and no money to pay his share. His turmoil had lasted long enough for Robin to approach the stall, banter cheekily with the woman and purchase ample amounts of chicken for the two of them. She came back looking very self-satisfied. "I think she gave me a little extra. Said something about springtime, youth."

Libra went red. "She…I think she's assumed…"

*Robin blinked. "What?" It fell into place for her a second later, her confusion melting to mirth. "Oh! Oh!" She threw her head back and laugh raucously, almost dropping her parcel. "That's **fantastic**! I forgot you people date!" She said it with wicked reverence.*

Libra's cheeks still brilliantly flushed, Robin cackling away, they started a slow pace through the crowds. Libra was happy this way – it gave him enough time to dodge oncoming traffic.

"Robin, I don't have any money." She stopped laughing and Libra wished it were actually possible to swallow his tongue. "I-I don't have time for a job and I only get an allowance from the church, so I'm afraid I can't eat with you."

Her face was blank. Libra hoped she could eat all that chicken by herself.

*"So," she said slowly, "you…**are** hungry?" She grinned when he began to sputter again. "Hey. Hey!" She held up a hand to silence him. "My treat. My mother gives me money every day but I have no idea what to spend it on. My wallet makes these weird creaking noises and those notes pressing together might start a fire."*

"Robin I can't, I couldn't…" His protests died on his lips when her gaze sharpened into speculation.

"We'll figure something out," she stated. "I get you, you don't want hand-outs. I just think it'd be great if you stayed - I mean it's a new experience, the festival is really pretty, I can talk to my mum about giving you a ride home." Libra stepped back, intending to make his excuses, a thrill of shock shooting up his spine as Robin stepped after him, her eyes desperate. "Don't go! It's not a problem; really, I'd rather you – "

Now it was her turn to look uncomfortable. Cocking his head, Libra took a very hesitant step forward. He was outside his comfort zone which meant she was within his, the minimum space he had to have between himself and anyone else in order to feel in control. His neck prickled and a lump the size of an apricot seemed to have lodged in his throat. "What?" he pressed hopefully.

Robin sighed, swinging their bag of chicken irritably. "You're the first person I've met who hasn't asked me if I'm Grimleal. Or called me a dreg. Or run away when I got angry. I would really, really...hate it if you left now."

She looked so miserable then. The airy confidence gone like air from a balloon, shoulders slumped inwards. His heart went out to her, as it often did to people in need. It didn't feel as far a journey as it usually did.

He opened his mouth but no words came out. It closed with a click, and he nervously moistened his lips before trying again.

"Well…I paint. And draw." Robin looked up, a flicker of optimism twitching her lips. "I could give you one of those if you

like. They're not fantastic, but if you – "

"*Deal! Deal, really, I'd love – I mean, yeah, whatever, I think that's cool." Robin practically floated away, bouncing excitedly on the balls of her feet. "This chicken is only getting colder, let's grab some more food and beat it." She smiled at him again, and he matched it with one of his own. Whatever she saw in it made her eyes crinkle joyfully.*

Robin looked sly. "You're full, aren't you?"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"I'm not!"

"You are! I can tell!"

"No! Well, yes, I am," Libra finally admitted, prompting a gleeful little laugh from Robin. He placed the dumplings in the little demilitarised zone between them, nudging them a few inches across. She waited until he had withdrawn his hands completely before picking up the container herself, wielding her chopsticks inexpertly. Libra was quite familiar with the utensils and Robin had been intently studying his technique from the corner of her eye but she still struggled. A plastic fork had been procured but she stubbornly refused to give up.

He watched her covertly – usually he would take great pains to disguise his humour but in this case he watched her with unbridled amusement. She was absorbed in her task, fingers slipping on thin, cheap wood as she tried to raise one of the morsels to her mouth. Each time she managed to pick one up it would inevitably tumble away, landing back amongst its fellow dumplings with a soggy '*splat*!' and flicking soy sauce over her blouse.

Finally, Robin gave up, and simply speared on the ends of her chopsticks. Libra covered his smile with one hand. "Stupid, delicious things!" Robin glanced his way ruefully. "These are harder to use than they look. You make it look so easy."

Libra went pink, though he wasn't sure why. "It's…just practice. We learn this when our cultural festivals come around so it's nothing special. You'll get it eventually." Her eyes dropped to his hand, and Libra realised he was idly twirling the sticks of wood like twin batons. He bit his lip and quickly closed a fist around them. God, he hoped she didn't think he had been showing off.

"You've got nimble fingers," she commented, cramming the dumplings into her mouth and chewing thoughtfully. She wasn't a dainty eater but she was at least polite, and she finished her mouthful before continuing. "You're nimble in general, actually. I saw you running for the doors on the platform, dodging those other kids. And you know, you haven't bumped into a single person since we got off the train even though the festival was packed." Neither had she; Libra had noticed things about her as well. But he wasn't interested in letting her know that.

"You don't like being touched," she said bluntly. Libra resisted the urge to flinch away, the previous good humour souring in a second. "You avoid it. Someone touches you, you're – you're a woodland animal, looking for escape." She was eyeing him now. Libra tried not to meet her gaze, instead staring out determinedly at the park.

It wasn't well lit – the few regulation streetlamps had dimmed and died long ago, but some thoughtful soul had strung up colourful paper lanterns for their spring festival. They seemed to float over their heads, twined around poles and tangled in trees in all sorts of colours – rose pink, creamy white and celadon. Their light was diffuse, ethereal, brightening green leaves and softening hard concrete.

It was a very small park - quite abandoned by the council and possibly forgotten entirely by everyone. The only playground equipment left was an old swingset, flourishing trees unpruned and grass tickling their calves. But it was away from the excitement, from pressing crowds and Libra felt curiously safe here – whether it was because of their seclusion or Robin's presence was hard to define.

Libra risked a glance back at her – Robin was idly pushing around the dumplings, a tiny crease in her forehead. She was frowning. "Sorry," she muttered, stabbing viciously at a particularly unco-operative dumpling. "I tend to run my mouth off. My mother says not everyone wants to hear what I have to say."

Swallowing thickly, his hands flickered out to grab her attention. She stopped tormenting the dumplings and looked up, her gaze patient and questioning.

He sucked in a deep breath, expelling it quickly. His hands fidgeted in his lap and for several moments Libra just sat

there, eyes dancing and trying to force out words lingering fearfully at the back of his throat. "I-I *don't* like being touched," he agreed, firing out the words in a rush. "It's…not something I - really…" His teeth clamped shut. This time he couldn't swallow around a throat now spiky and gun cold.

Robin nodded slowly, her full attention burning a hole into him. "You don't have to explain it. It's your body, your personal space. I've got no right to say what you do with it."

The lump dissolved, trickling relief and embarrassment down his throat. Libra was horrified to find tears pricking at his eyes, and he bent his head forward a little further. "Thanks," he whispered hoarsely.

He heard her rustle through another of their plastic carrybags. They had bought perhaps more food than they really intended to eat, but Robin had been enchanted by the variety on display and had ended up purchasing a sample of almost everything. She had, Libra had tried not to notice, always gotten a little extra of whatever he had shown interest in.

"I think it's time for dessert," she announced, tactfully changing the subject to Libra's utmost relief. She pulled free three containers. "Lessee…there's strawberry shortcake…the cute sticky rice dumpling things…we have a lot of dumplings, Libra. Oh! The igaga – the amigaya – imagawa – the little pudding stuffed pancakes!"

"I was running from my friends," Libra blurted out. He cringed; it had been veering into safer territory and he had to drag them back. Robin stopped her search and observed him, that thin eyebrow raising in question.

"I don't have a lot of experience with this stuff but I don't think I've ever read about running *from* your friends," she commented, handing him a container of mispronounced pancakes. It gave him something to stare at – he couldn't meet her eyes for more than a few seconds without his terrible blush flooding his cheeks and tying up his vocal chords.

Libra cracked open the container and began prodding at the sweets. "I…suppose they're not really my friends."

"What are they, then?" Robin prompted after a second.

Libra shrugged. This game was up. "People who let me spend time around them."

Robin was silent. Libra assumed she was rethinking her offering of friendship. That he couldn't blame her for; many of the students would offer temporary friendship but nothing could be long-term. Being an outcast was like being a leper – you got a sympathy but no one wanted to get too close in case it was passed on.

It had been nice, he thought vaguely. She was a kind person, the sort of honest kindness that came from wanting to genuinely see another person happy. And she was strong. He felt stronger just being around her, like she was radioactive in the best possible way.

There was also her very possible insanity. She was overly defensive and all fractured in a way he couldn't quite discern yet. She was scared, too. It had him want to reach out even though he knew the gesture was futile.

He would give her an excuse, Libra decided. It was the charitable thing to do; he often gave excuses for the other students to leave and they always accepted with an air of relief. He had to go to the library. He was feeling ill. He was skipping lunch to speak with a teacher.

Most people would accept anything and sometimes Libra gave the most ridiculous excuses, just to leave faster. He would always be the weird kid who slunked around the school, keeping close to the walls in case he accidentally touched someone.

Setting aside their remaining pancakes, Libra stretched as casually as he could manage. "I should be getting home." His words made Robin glance at him sharply, a muscle in her cheek spasming.

"My mother is taking you home, remember?" Robin held up her phone; it was gleaming, new, expensive and already had a huge crack spanning the screen. "She said yes." Robin's hand dropped, and she frowned anxiously. "You…want to go home now?"

Her question was so innocent, so confused Libra felt compelled to be truthful. "No, I…thought you might want to leave."

Another brow crinkle. "Why?"

Libra shrugged; he felt like this was an ongoing pattern. "Most people do by this point."

Robin seemed to ponder this; after a little while she nudged the pancakes back over to him. For wont of anything else to do, Libra picked them back up.

"You run away from your friends?"

"No, no I-I don't think I would."

"You don't *think* you *would*?"

"Yeah, if – "

"…If?"

"If…If I…had any." *So pathetic.*

"You have me." Robin dazzled him with a smile. "So you can run away if you want to. But you shouldn't because there's still a lot of food to eat. I can't do it on my own."

Libra's heart lurched again. He crammed a few pancakes in his mouth to buy some time. They split open and he tasted hot chocolate pudding almost filling his mouth to capacity. It made him cough and desperately chew.

Robin laughed. "They must be good!"

"Are you sure it's okay for me to be here?" Libra asked anxiously. Even though he had a good half a head of height on her, he still managed to peer over her shoulder. Robin waved her hand dismissively.

"It's not a problem at all," she assured. A teasing frown tilted her mouth. "Though, there is a risk my mother will adopt you and you will be forced to have me as a sibling."

Libra took an exaggerated step back. "I really should go, in that case." Shock flashed across her face for a second before she caught on. Her face split into a wide grin, and she took a teasing swipe at him that came nowhere close to actually making contact.

His heart still gave an anxious thump. It made him tingle.

Robin was halfway up the front path by the time he recovered. Hesitation stilled his footsteps – this was the first time since grade school he had gone over to another person's house, been explicitly invited.

The house was actually quite nice – a two story, white brick colonial-style home, high stone wall encircling the perimeter. Someone had poured a considerable amount of money into fixing this place up, though they had left the yard to run wild still.

He rather liked it. Same as the station and the park, it felt like nature was pushing back against their encroaching city.

That same someone had perhaps been the one to leave the porch light. He could hear faint music, and a spicy scent tickled his nostrils.

"Come in," called Robin impatiently. She was at the door already, and before he could formulate another protest his feet were carrying him up the steps.

He stopped precisely two feet away from Robin while she fumbled with her keys, muttering irritably under her breath. After they spent ten minutes trying to correctly pronounce the names of their food they had wandered through the streets again. Robin had provided most of the conversation, dragging him over to games or to look at shop stalls.

His hand drifted halfway to his blazer pocket. She had bought him a little silver bell, which was meant to chase away evil spirits when it rang. Libra had shyly offered that silver bells were used in the spring ceremonies to Naga as a way of attracting favour, and Robin had declared it was *proof*.

It was his first present from someone who wasn't a cleric.

Still grumbling, Robin finally managed to work to door open and blinding light spilled out. Hesitantly following her indoors Libra was stunned by how utterly, strangely, comfortingly *normal* it was indoors.

Where he stood was in an ordinary hall, an oak archway leading to a comfortable lounge room on the left, another archway opening out into a sizeable dining room on the right. A straight staircase led up to the second floor. The walls were painted a pretty caramel shade, and the polished floorboards ran like rich, fresh coffee underfoot. A grandfather clock solemnly tocked in its corner and Libra could faintly hear dishes clinking, a feminine voice singing along off-key to the radio.

"I'm home, mother," Robin called out, and spared Libra an anxious glance before calling again, "it's me, Robin."

"*Habibti*?" The clinking stopped, and rapid footsteps tapped briskly towards them. A woman bustled through the archway, and Libra couldn't help but stare for a few seconds. She was tall, and held herself with a poise that Libra immediately identified as the one Robin tried to emulate. Her angular face was accentuated by her fashionably styled pink hair. She made no effort to hide a pale scar spanning the width of one cheek.

Their eyes met, and Libra immediately dropped her gaze. Her eyes were curious, wary.

"Mum, this is Libra," Robin announced, stepping backwards so she stood beside Libra. Her proximity made panic and relief explode in equal measure through his gut. His mouth went curiously dry.

Glancing at him, clearly wondering where his tongue had slipped away to, Robin gestured towards her mother. "Libra, this is my mother, Mum – "

"I was given a name, same as you," Robin's mother scolded playfully, flapping a hand at Robin's head. Her accent was thick, and when she moved Libra caught sight of several swirling tattoos running down her underarm.

Robin ducked her head, but relented, muttering, "Milka. It sounds weird. Mothers are not meant to have their own name."

"I hope my daughter did not drag you away from your family, Libra," Milka commented over Robin's grousing. He didn't miss the worried glance Milka shot her daughter's way.

"Um, no." Libra glanced away shyly. "It's a pleasure to meet you." Thankfully, Milka was now scrutinising Robin's torso.

"Darling, what have you got on your blouse?" Milka was holding Robin at arm's length now for full inspection.

"Soy sauce. I wanted to learn how to use chopsticks and Libra taught me."

"It'll never come out, the fabric is ruined."

"Sorry."

"Um, sorry." That was Libra.

"Sorry? I should be throwing you a parade, Libra." Milka gave him a smile, coaxing a small one in return. "That top was hideous."

"It is not!" Robin protested, wriggling free and crossing her arms.

"It was! You have been dressing like you grew up in a porcelain doll factory!"

"Girls dress in lace, mother," Robin sighed like she had to patiently explain this obvious fact a thousand times. "And they have pretty patterns and skirts." To Libra's sudden dread, she appealed to him. "Libra, what do girls wear?" Curiously, she cringed after saying this.

Still feeling as though his opinion was expected, Libra racked his brains for a hint of what the girls at school wore aside from their uniforms. "Uh, whatever they like. Dresses if they feel like it." That wasn't enough. "A lot of girls just wear jeans and t-shirts."

Robin frowned. "That's weird. Since when?"

"Since we left the dark ages, I think." Though he was horrified with himself for letting such a remark slip it was almost worth it for the look on Robin's face. Her mother laughed herself sick all the way back to the kitchen.

Robin was shaking her head, leaning lightly against the bannister. "Unbelievable…" She beamed though, much to his relief. "You're funny." Libra smiled at her again – it felt different on his face than his usual smiles, and it made her eyes crinkle again.

"I'm going to change," she said in a sudden rush, bolting halfway up the stairs. "Can you tell my mother I'll be down in a minute?" Robin didn't wait for his response, disappearing up the last steps in a white flash.

Libra stared after her. That was odd.

"Robin?" Libra lurked awkwardly at her doorway, his eyes firmly fixed on his shoes. Who knew what he would see? He

heard Robin cease whatever she was doing.

"Ow, stupid…yes?"

"Your mother said we'd be going in a few minutes." Libra had spent the most awkward five minutes of his life loitering downstairs until Milka had asked him to fetch her daughter.

"Oh, right! Thanks, I'll be just a minute." She was quiet for a second – too quiet. "Aren't…you coming in?" she asked uncertainly.

Libra quailed, and felt that horrible blush creep up into his cheeks again. He peeked through his fringe, relieved to see her fully dressed. "Ah, I…um, it would be a little…improper, wouldn't it?"

Once again, that little crinkle of confusion creased Robin's face. It made her look vulnerable, moreso than he thought she would like to know. Like she had encountered something strange and foreign and didn't know how to deal with it. "Oh…I suppose…I don't…know?"

Libra breathed deep, and clenched his fists with resolve. What was the harm of entering a female's room? It was just a bedroom. Another room to complete basic functions. Like his room – Libra tried to think of all the things he did in his room. A bedroom was for sleeping. For reading. For storing clothes. For changing said clothes. For –

He stoppered that thought before it could fully bloom and make him run for the front door, instead studying her room a trifle desperately. It was about three times the size of his own, painted deep carmine and trimmed in nectarine yellow. Polished wooden boards gleamed underfoot, and all the furniture was old-fashioned mahogany. Bergamot tickled his nose.

He had no experience with what the average room of a teenage girl would look like but he was reasonably sure this was not it. It did contain several large bookshelves, and he gratefully gravitated towards them.

"You like reading?" Robin was engrossed again in her dresser drawers, rummaging about furiously in a top drawer, occasionally tearing out handfuls of clothes and scattering them across her tidy floor.

Libra was careful not to pay too close attention to the individual pieces, lest the rest of his night be dedicated to earnest prayer. "I do." His fingers traced the well-worn spine of a familiar book. "You like *First Response Recon*?"

Robin nodded enthusiastically, her eyes still on her task. "Yes! I just got the third book – I couldn't find it in the last six bookstores I went into and I refused to look up what happened after – oh, which book are you up to?"

"I just finished the fifth book," Libra answered, a little proudly, and was rewarded with Robin's bounce of excitement.

"There's five now?" She looked fit to faint. "Five! I thought I was lucky to find the third!"

"I have the fourth and fifth, you –", he teetered for a minute, then forged on, "- you can borrow them when you're ready, if you want."

"Really?" Robin face glowed with joy and she clapped her hands like a small child. "Thank you, yes! Perfect!" She spotted something on the floor and tumbled after it, brimming with puppy eagerness. "I'll never have a life at this rate. I haven't read half the books on that shelf and mum's been stocking the library downstairs like a woman possessed. How did you get those copies?"

"Hmmm?" Libra had been watching her untangle a pair of black, fingerless gloves. He hadn't really thought it noteworthy before but she wore similar gloves already, though they were the precise shade of her skin. "My school library had them. I, uh, the librarian wanted to get rid of them so she gave them to me." Not exactly true. The books could have lasted a little longer but Libra thought she was just sorry to see him there so often, on his own.

"Your school has a library?"

Libra tried not to laugh. "Most schools do." Long banked pride gave off a little smoke. "It's the largest school library in the country, and the oldest in the city. They converted the old school cathedral once the new one was built." He didn't think it was a terribly interesting fact but Robin looked like she was seriously contemplating a break in.

Unthinkingly, he pointed to her gloves. Her thumb was just hooked under the fabric of the ones she was wearing, which Libra could now see were stained with soy sauce. "Your hands are cold?"

"Oh! Ah, no…" Her left hand drifted almost unconsciously to cover the right – all Libra could see was a dark soy stain on

the right glove, which was nothing to be ashamed of. Robin turned her back awkwardly, shielding her hands with her body; stained gloves fell to the floor with a faint slap, the noise rousing Libra from his stupefaction.

He made a show of turning back to the bookshelf, studying the titles with overt concentration. If anyone had cared to ask later he wouldn't have been able to name a single one, his mind casting about for a distraction.

"If you could have any of their powers, which would you have?" Libra asked suddenly.

"Uhhh, powers? From *First Response Recon*?" he could still hear her rustling about, and he took his time examining a thick, gold-veined leather book. "I always liked Azu's power but I think she really wastes it. All she animates is stuffed toys, and even then only to fetch keys or open doors. There's so much more they could be used for!"

"Ah, but that's part of her character." Libra was warming up to a subject he'd only chosen as the first thing to spring to mind. "She doesn't have the imagination or the delegation skills to animate anything else. That's why she's on a recon squad instead of a strike team. She's too rigid on procedure when a strike team needs to be able to adapt."

Robin huffed a speculative, slightly admiring noise. "You're really smart, I never even thought of it that way."

"Azu is an easy character to dismiss at first." Libra didn't know why he was going on; he stared, unseeing, at the books. "She seems very an archetypical leader, there to whip the squad into shape, and provide occasional comic relief in the form of her strict adherence to the rules. But she's constantly curious about her team, and she's always reaching out to them. She wants to know what it's like to be them but she's been military so long she's forgotten how to think differently."

Libra realised Robin had gone very, very quiet. He dared glance over to her; she was staring over her shoulder at him, her back still to him and gaze tightly guarded.

Their eyes locked. The silence went on for a second. Then another. It had stretched out to ten, twenty, marching through to thirty. Their breathing whispered loudly through the room, and Libra was becoming all too aware of her now. She had taken his comment as gospel, and now wore a pair of form-fitting grey jeans under a plain black t-shirt. It was comfortable, natural and she still looked frighteningly dangerous. Without the stupid frilly blouse and long skirt he could see sinewy muscles at play under her smooth skin, the predatory tilt of her head, her careful shifting of weight.

It was more than that, though. Her entire body looked as though it was carved from pure fighting instinct. The childish ribbon was gone and her locks hung loose and straight down her back now, snow against midnight, and her eyes were the hard brown of naked trees in winter.

It shattered in an instant when she smiled at him. Her real smile again. She had so many smiles and he liked this one the most because it was so small and new, a baby bird peering over the edge of its nest for the first time. It broke the frost in her skin, travelled up her eyes, heating them to the warm darkness of twilit woodland in summer.

"You've had a lot more time to think than most people," she stated gently, her accent softer than ever. It was matter-of-fact but she looked at him, *really looked at him* like she understood something.

Libra tried to play it off, shrugging and returning to the bookshelf, but his lips twitch and curved anyway. He could feel his cheeks pinking, possibly from all the cottony warmth billowing in his chest.

"What power would you have?" Robin asked suddenly, turning back to face him. A stolen peep in her direction made the fuzzy feelings drop a little lower into his stomach, stirred searing and visceral. The last outfit she had been wearing had not been so…figuring-hugging around her front.

Libra had to spend a few precious seconds trying to line up a coherent sentence. "Kenji's power is my favourite. The plants he talks to always have something to say."

Robin giggled and came up to stand next to him, leaving a foot and a half between them and tucking her arms behind her back. He noticed she did this when she got close to him, as though signalling she wasn't going to make any sudden, grabby moves. "What about Erika's ability? You don't think animals have anything interesting to say?"

"Robin, most animals are clearly just screaming obscenities…*or worse*." Her laugh broke through any residual tension, and almost did the same to his eardrum. Her mirth was often explosive, especially when tickled by something unexpected.

"Kenji's so lonely, I feel for him."

"He's not lonely, Robin. He has a whole conservatory of plants."

"That's not the same. That just means he has something to talk to." Robin flicked the spine of book two. "Okay, so, think of this. Right after the arcade mission, when Kenji was left behind because, really…what good is a florapath in an arcade?" Libra nodded. "Kenji's in his greenhouse talking to his plants. He ignores the recon squad at school, during their missions, after their missions. But when he sees the team he stops, stands up and stares at them. He tries to call out but the glass muffles his voice. He can see them so clearly but I think *he thinks* he can't join them." Robin looked lost to her thoughts. "I suppose, as far as he's concerned, he is eternally trapped and always watching from a cage of his own design. He'll always be a bystander. But Kenji could leave anytime he wants! I think he's just so afraid to commit to anything that could reject him he confines himself to the plants, who don't *have* a word for rejection."

Robin flicked the books again. "At least, that's what I got from it. I could be wrong. It happens, every now and then. Oh, my mother's waiting, isn't she? Hold up, I just need another hairtie…" Robin rushed back to her dresser and began groping about the miscellaneous knick-knacks piled up, scowling a little. "Darn. I thought I had another – "

Without thinking, Libra reached back and tugged his borrowed hairband loose. His hair unravelled in an instant, tumbling happily over his shoulders in a blond cascade. He held it out expectantly to her.

"You should use this one," he offered. Their fingers brushed as she took it – he snatched back his hand a little too fast to be polite.

After a few seconds Libra waved his hand in front of her eyes. "Robin? Are you feeling well?"

She blinked rapidly, her slightly open mouth shutting with an audible click. "Y-Yes. Fine. Your hair…"

Libra instinctively threaded a hand through his hair, grabbing a fistful. "Oh, it's very long, I usually keep it braided but – "

"You should still braid it," Robin agreed, her voice slightly higher-pitched than usual. "Not the whole thing though, it makes your face look too thin. Just braid the front parts or it looks like you're hiding." She demonstrated on her own hair, twisting them around her head and holding them just long enough for Libra to get the idea.

She dropped her hair and it once again framed her smile. The back of his throat quivered, his hands flexed and for a second he thought his knees would fold in on themselves. It *felt* like a proximity panic attack, but panic attacks normally didn't make him bubble with barely suppressed delight.

As they walked towards the staircase, Robin in front, Libra subtly tested his chest. His heart didn't stop slamming against his ribcage until they pulled out of the driveway.

Libra watched Robin again. He couldn't help himself anymore. A light rain had started up outside as they drove leisurely through the circles of Ylisse – Robin's mother had turned on the heater immediately, and the inside of the car was toasty warm.

Robin occasionally bantered brazenly with her mother, sometimes appealing for Libra's support in her less audacious comments. Milka counter-appealed once or twice, obviously just to tweak her daughter's nose, and Libra would acquiesce just to hear Robin indignantly insist that her mother "get her own friends."

All too soon they were slowing to a stop outside Libra's orphanage, hidden behind high stone walls, only the brilliantly lit spires of the main cathedral visible. He took his time with his seatbelt; he and Robin had discovered a shared adoration for another of Libra's favourite book series, including a few key quibbles.

"The last one I read just confused me! There was so much, you know, build up and tension and exploration of their relationship. They developed through three books, she saves him, and he rescues her. Then boom! He has a fiancée he loves so-o-o-o-o much and she gets a love interest out of thin air."

"Her new love interest was a painfully thin ploy," Libra agreed, finally abandoning all pretence and reluctantly moving to exit the car. "A carbon copy of her with a palette swap." To his surprise Robin didn't even break stride, swinging out her own side.

"I'll walk you in," she offered cheerily. "Could be all sorts of mischievous folk out there."

"At least one more now," Libra agreed, and blushed when her laugh belled out again. In an attempt to regain his composure his gaze wandered and he accidentally caught Milka's eye. She wasn't smiling, but in a good, sad way – her expression was too fragile to support a smile.

He thanked her bashfully and fell into step beside Robin. The sidegate was twenty feet away and half-hidden by harmless ivy – it grew so thick on these walls nearly his whole arm disappeared into the leaves before his fingers

brushed the door. He used his never-before-needed key and they slipped inside. After he shut the gate it seemed oddly private, both of them still concealed by the damp plants. Off in the distance, Libra could see Sister Kestrel outlined by the orphanage door, patiently scanning the courtyard for his arrival. He was lucky she was the one on guard and short-sighted to boot.

They instinctively nestled back into damp foliage, the night wrapping tenderly around them. It was disobedient; he should really thank her politely and head straight indoors. But concealed by shadow and plant Libra felt like they could spin out the time indefinitely.

"Wow." Robin was staring beyond the orphanage to the cathedral beyond the walls. It was a mindblowing sight, especially the first time you saw it. The previous Exalt had put a lot of effort into restoring the creamy stone monument, and also wanted everyone to know it by installing rich lights in key places, to accentuate detailed archivolts, delicate crockets or painted sculptures of saints. The highest spires reach so high they disappeared into low clouds, and every window depicted a different historic scene, picked out in stained glass.

Most of Libra thought it a triumph, a show of devotion from the people to Naga. *See*, it seemed to implore, *see how much we love you?*

A tiny part of him thought it was showy and pointless.

"It's amazing," Robin remarked breathlessly. "I've never seen anything like it." She recovered a bit of her composure. "But…also showy."

'*And pointless*,' Libra thought.

"And pointless."

Libra chortled, his hand covering his mouth. Robin looked pleased.

"You really live here?" Robin summed it up with a wave of her hand.

Libra instead pointed to the orphanage building. It was quite nice, a six storey building made of the same stone as the cathedral, and bristling with similar ornamentation. It would have been impressive in its own right if it hadn't been attached to the convent and by extension, the crown jewel of Ylisstol; beside them it look squat and dim. "There."

"Ohhhh, you must have a good view over the wall."

Libra tried to shrug modestly. "I'm on the sixth floor facing the cathedral." It never got old for him, staring out at that glorious tribute to Naga. His fate didn't seem so bad when he considered he might get to serve inside those walls.

"I'd like to go inside one day," Robin said, and Libra briefly wondered which one she meant.

He turned to her then. A thank you on his tongue, some more polite small talk…a hopeful invitation of meeting again soon. But Libra had forgotten two very important details. One; at this time of year the ivy walls would shed quite a few leaves and they clustered thickly at the walls. Two: they got very slippery when damp.

His left leg shot out from under him, sending him pitching forward right towards Robin. She half-turned, held out her hands to stabilise him…hesitated, then half retreated.

Unable to catch himself and his feet sliding over wet leaves, he put out his hands to brace against the wall…and his hands hit smooth, round shoulders.

Libra and Robin tumbled back further until they both ended up semi-propped against the perimeter wall. They stood there, stunned, for a few minutes, Robin underneath…

Underneath…

Libra's vision was full of dark green leaves and ivory skin – his hands were still on Robin's shoulders, and one of his knees had slid in between her legs. Robin's palms rested flat against his chest, her touch burning through his thin shirt. This close he could feel her chest rising and falling, warm breath brushing his neck, her eyes wide and shocked.

Libra stifled an instinctual yelp.

This was *bad*. Worse than the change-rooms at school. Worse than school dances. Worse than affection from the younger orphans he was unable to return. Worse than the time the school nurse had tried to comfort him with a hug after

he had been hit so hard during a basketball game he had nearly passed out – Libra had ended up halfway across the room in an instant, and she had a huge bruise on her arm for several days afterwards.

Panic was always the first reaction. Little, slow touches, if he initiated them could be tolerable. Robin was everywhere, *too close* like she had stepped through him. He knew she could *feel* him seizing up, *feel* him suddenly turn clammy and cold, his erratic gasps and sky-rocketing pulse.

And the *worst* part was that even though he was three seconds from tearing off his own skin, he was still having a very embarrassing, very male reaction to her proximity. Some weirdly calm part of Libra's brain suggested his lack of contact with anything female made it more difficult, because where their bodies met it felt like he was being sloughed down to exposed nerves, each one popping and sparking. His stomach tightened further.

Her hands slid a little down his chest, fingertips a whispering pressure. He may as well be naked for all his shirt protected him from her touch; his body felt as malleable as fresh clay and he was sure if he looked down he would see shallow grooves worn into him by her trailing hands. He swallowed noticeably, and wanted to cry and run and apologise and a lot of things he wouldn't even begin to entertain.

Robin blinked, her hips shifting a little. A throaty noise slipped almost inaudibly from Libra's lips.

"Oh, you really *are* a boy."

His heart froze and plummeted into his stomach.

"Wh-What?" he choked out, hands falling to his side. Comprehension dawned on Robin's face.

"Oh, I – I didn't mean it like that!" She took a step forward and tried to smile placatingly. "I just…you said you were a boy back on the train, and I just figured you *wanted* to be a boy – " his face contorted; he felt hot, empty and his knees turned to sand – Libra couldn't have reeled back faster if she had slapped him.

Robin followed, her hand reaching out. He snatched his arms out of reach, almost destroying his precarious balance. "I am…I…" He painfully pressed his hand to his forehead, like it would stop utter mortification from spilling out. "How…*Robin* –" It came out more betrayed than he intended. Robin's face turned grey.

Gods above, he felt vile. Again? Why now, with her, at this time?

He could hear Robin making soothing noises, but they sounded warped and faraway, like he was drifting away underwater.

Everything had been going so *well* -

"Libra, I just *assumed*…I didn't want to mess up…" he might have stayed to hear her out. Might have been able to push through the neck deep shame to hear her finally straighten her words.

But Robin broke the cardinal rule. She grabbed his forearms in a vice grip, and he could feel the strength in her digits, like scorching steel cables wrapping around his limbs - it made his flesh want to run screaming up his arms. His pulse screamed in his ears, a cold sweat immediately broke out on his brow and ran into his eyes. Her warm, soft skin seared him to the bone, sent voices smoking up the marrow and into the ugly depths of his mind.

Libra tore from her grasp, back-pedalling as fast as he could. His well-trained sense of propriety said he should bid her farewell. He probably would have spluttered something out if he hadn't met her eyes at that moment, seen the horror there.

Libra turned tail and fled.

"Libra, wait, please I – Libra!"

But Libra didn't stop. He didn't stop when he reached the warm rectangle of light, Sister Kestrel standing off to the side, his name on her lips. He didn't stop as he pushed past her, ignoring her exclamation and took the stairs three at a time. He didn't stop as he rushed past several of the older children, all of them calling out to him. Through sheer luck he found his room, fumbled with the doorknob for a few agonising seconds, and managed to crack it open enough for him to stagger inside.

It was blessedly cool and familiar in his room, dark except for brilliant moonlight spilling in through his open curtains. Libra threw his bag onto the floor, not caring for the books and paints rattling about inside, and leaning against his door until it clicked shut. Legs trembling, he just managed to throw the lock before they gave out altogether.

Collapsed against his door, cheek pressed into its rough grain and eyes partly closed, Libra allowed the humiliation to finally hit him full force. Even though his eyes squeezed shut reflexively against the memory it flooded through his being, drawing a raspy breath which sounded too much like a sob.

- Her eyes, wide and shocked –

- Hand pressed to his chest, slender fingers right over his wildly beating heart -

- Lightly parted, pale lips. From them fell –

"- Oh, you really *are* a boy – "

Libra choked on despair, his throat wound tighter than a spring, so tight it physically hurt to breath. Why had he thought it would be any different? Why had he thought she had seen -

The day had been wondrous. Libra was not meant for wondrous. His routine was lonely and paltry, with no room for marvels.

Mechanically, Libra clambered up from the floor. He undressed in the dark, hanging up his uniform in its customary place and working his braid loose.

Sweet, silvery music jangled in his blazer pocket. He ignored it.

He had just enough energy to pull on some sleeping clothes before collapsing into his bed. The fabric was starchy, reeking of detergent and incense. The memory of bergamot filled his senses.

Libra rolled over onto his side and stared blankly out the window.

Milka glanced several times at her daughter on the way home, even taking the long way to see if she would crack. The past few months had been full of new experiences, new emotions and new ways of thinking. But she had not seen this pensive, fretful look on her daughter before. Chewing on the inside of her cheek, half curled up in her seat.

Finally, Robin – and where did she get that name? – spoke. And Milka knew it was serious, because her daughter spoke in their mother language. "*Mama, I…I think I made an awful mistake*."

Milka didn't pull over immediately, as she wanted to. She just nodded, and if she griped the steering wheel a little tighter her daughter didn't notice. "*The first step towards fixing a mistake is acknowledging you made it.*"

Robin nodded, but her brow creased further. Silence reigned for a few more minutes.

"*Would you like to talk about it, darling*?" prodded Milka gently, a little too curious about what had troubled her daughter now. She was not the sort of girl to allow a situation to go unremedied. Usually she chased down the problem and declared her contrition immediately. *Sincerity* was optional for her daughter.

She had returned to the car shoulders slumped and head bowed shamefully, her footsteps dragging.

Robin first shook her head, then nodded. "*I…I said something very stupid. To that boy. I think I*…" Her voice trailed off and Milka was torn between her sympathy and outrageous curiousity.

"*Did you know he was…a he*?" Robin blurted out, palms pressed against her eyes.

Milka couldn't stop the groan but she did manage to hold off banging her head against the steering wheel. "*Yes, darling, didn't you*?"

"I didn't think it was my place to pry!" Immediately on the defensive and back to the common Ylissean language. Also strange. "I just…how do you ask a question like that? And then it was too *late*, and I was so surprised it just fell out of my mouth and – " Robin cut herself off with a slap to her forehead, grinding her palm against her skull.

Milka sighed; for all her many talents her daughter could be just as stupid and cowardly as the next person. It gave her a weird sense of relief; vulgar human qualities were still human qualities, and *that* had been touch and go for a while there for Robin. "Did you apologise?"

"No, he ran off before I could say anything!" Robin slouched down in her seat, gaze following each streetlamp zipping past. "I'm so *daft*, mother."

"It happens to the best of us, dearest," Milka soothed, and when Robin turned a sardonic eye towards her Milka matched it easily. "You are not infallible."

"No one is," Robin murmured softly, forlornly, curling in even further. Milka exhaled sharply through her nose, slowing down for a red light. "I thought I was doing everything right and I wasn't paying attention – "

"What were you paying attention to, then?"

"…*Nothing shut up*." It was lucky the light had yet to change because Milka was useless for a good twenty seconds, half-collapsed against the steering-wheel as she laughed helplessly at her daughter's expense. Robin preoccupied herself with picking at a loose thread on her gloves.

Finally, Milka's hysterics died down into hiccups, and the light changed.

"You done?" Robin mumbled.

It prompted another few titters to slip out, but Milka managed a nod. "You could probably never see him again," she suggested objectively, swinging the car left around a corner. "It's a big city. Easy to forget someone."

As she thought, Robin's brow furrowed. "But I don't want to do that. *And*," she added quickly, seeing a silly grin start to play on Milka's face, "it's awful to leave someone with something like that hanging over their head. I should say sorry."

"You should."

"Because…because I *am* sorry."

Milka parked the car. Swivelled in her seat and fixed her most penetrating stare on her daughter. Robin had grown up with that stare and it still made her squirm. "Are you."

"Yes!"

"You've never been sorry before."

"Nope."

"...When are you going to fix this?"

"As soon as I can, mum."

"Oh, you are brave, my sweet."

Robin smiled proudly.

"Off you go, then."

Robin looked around in confusion, finally taking time to peer out the window. They were a block away from the cathedral, its massive spires impressively lit by thousands of warm lamps. "What – we weren't going home?"

"I've been circling the neighbourhood since we started," Milka said cheerily, switching on the heater. She smiled slyly at her daughter. "You were off with the faeries." Robin made an automatic sign of protection even as she pulled a face at her mother.

Milka unlocked Robin's door; her mysteriously slow daughter just stared, comprehension dawning. "You just run along and fix things up with your friend," she chided. "And call me when you're done – I'm not trusting the taxi drivers around this place just yet."

"Mum, that man was not trying to con you, there really are a lot of toll stations – *stop blowing raspberries at me*!" Robin maintained her scowl for only a few second but her false anger was futile. Eventually, her face melted into a sheepish smile and Milka's heart warmed in turn.

Robin – she was liking this name, her light-winged little Robin – cracked open the passenger door. So many things, new things, were coming from her daughter today. A friend being brought home. A male friend, which made Milka want to laugh with giddy joy at the sheer impossibility of it. A deference to that friend, which Robin hadn't had to show to any before in her life.

And now this. Real fear in her daughter's eyes. "Do you…think he will forgive me?" she asked in a small voice; Milka

couldn't have stopped herself from reaching out and affectionately squeezing her daughter's free hand. Not even if the whole world depended on it.

"I think you will need to accept that he might not," Milka said as gently as she could. Robin's face crumpled a little. "But…I don't see how anyone could stay angry with my little Robin for very long."

In a flash, Robin was beaming. "You like my name? I just thought of it today." Milka was nodding, grinning, and a perfect match to her daughter.

"It suits you very well," she assured her, and Robin's face threatened to split.

"He said it was nice."

At this angle Robin blended in seamlessly with the shadow of a sickly looking gargoyle, so she doubted Libra would be able to spy her from there. He was staring away from her anyway, his eyes fixed on the moon. Robin studied him again, as she had been all day, and found the same problem occurred as it had previously.

She tried to be clinical in her approach, but each time she took note of some weakness or strength in him her mind insisted on adding…footnotes.

His skin was very pure in the moonlight, she noted. She didn't have to study his skin further as she had already filed away as much objective information as she could about that feature, but her eyes insisted on lingering.

The light cast soft shadows on his face. It illuminated the straight line of his nose and crowned on its ski-jump tip, bled colour from his lips, peaked across his fine, pointy chin and brushed delicately down his neck. It turned his hair from pale blonde to an almost white-gold, streaming loosely over his face and across his pillow.

The only thing that didn't lose colour were his eyes. Robin had made many observations about his eyes.

She noted their shape, and took a broad guess at his lineage.

He was skilled at hiding his emotions, but the subtle crinkling at their corners always gave away his true feelings.

When he was thinking something rude or sarcastic the left corner twitched a little.

When he was intrigued or aroused they widened slightly as his pupils dilated.

He suffered from the early stages of myopia – probably had no idea. The right eye was a little worse than the left.

And…they were green, green like jade but even *better*. Like someone had taken jade, and thought about what jade was and would be, how precious it was, its history crossing over thousands of years, thought of every piece of jade buried beyond man's reach all the way through to the finest pieces carved into jewellery. Then they had taken those thoughts and refined them, adding more love and detail and tiny colours and wrought a pair of jade eyes that could be cool and warm and with so many little secrets - at the end of it all, the kind of jade colour she thought of when she heard the word *jade*.

Her heart was jumping. She pressed her hand to her neck to feel her pulse – elevated.

Libra blinked slowly, his eyelashes sweeping his cheek, and Robin's burgeoning train of thought was derailed. The moonlight added a peculiar brightness to his eyes, like the colour was on a feedback loop.

Robin wondered if she had made him cry. It wouldn't have been the first time her tongue had lashed someone to tears. Though his eyes weren't red or puffy, guilt still rose like bile. She pushed it down and took a deep, steadying breath.

There was a chance he would not forgive her.

There was a chance he would refuse to open the door, or push her from her perch, or shout for the guards.

Did orphanages have guards?

Or maybe he was trained. He moved with a litheness uncommon to similar bookish creatures Robin had encountered before. Though the incident had been a great step backwards socially, it had allowed Robin to gather crucial data on Libra. Frustratingly, each time she brought it up for review her brain persisted in supplying *auxiliary and altogether excessive detail*.

A little pink, Robin tried to focus again. This had never been a problem before.

Her physical well-being was not a concern. She had recovered from worse than anything Libra could throw at her. The bud of their friendship had nearly been crushed by her thoughtlessness, by her lack of attention, and that made an unfamiliar ache burn in her chest.

She wasn't upset that he was male. It made no difference to her.

Annoyance at her poor (or misguided?) attention to detail side-tracked her again. She had no excuse, except that he had distracted her entirely when he defended his own attackers. It had landed her in what she had been dreading ever since they came to this stupid, shiny city – an awkward social situation.

Robin shook herself, so violently it threatened to reveal her hiding place. She was procrastinating. She hated apologising, but this time...

If he accepted it…

Robin sucked in her courage, and tapped on his window.

Fun fact: Milcah means "queen" in Hebrew. A reference to Validar's high status and eventual ascension to king of Plegia. Modded to Milka because that was actually the name I picked for her originally and it worked out perfectly.*self highfive* I love Mama Robin so it's high time she got a name.

First Response Recon is an original work of mine. It's exactly as weird as it sounds. I dislike heavily referencing pop culture in my stories because I feel this dates them really quickly.